

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 1 | Number 7 (1894)

pps. 531-536

Pike's Explorations

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/).

Recommended Citation

"Pike's Explorations." *The Annals of Iowa* 1 (1894), 531-536.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1972>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://iowaresearchonline.org/)

The "Band" held its last meeting October, 1843, at Father Turner's study, when the place where each should go was agreed upon. Six of them are still living—Robbins, Salter, Harvey Adams and Ephraim Adams in this State; Turner at Owego, New York, and Alden at South Marshfield, Mass., the first two still in the active ministry with colleagues. Ripley died in Connecticut; Lane in Maine; Hutchinson, Spaulding and Hill in Iowa.‡

GRINNELL, Iowa, July 9, 1894.

PIKE'S EXPLORATIONS.

A most romantic career was that of Zebulon M. Pike, who rose from the rank of ensign to that of brigadier-general in the regular army, and was killed in an attack upon York, (now Toronto) Upper Canada, April 27, 1813. While he was a brave soldier, freely giving his life in defense of his country, he is better known as an explorer, second only to Lewis and Clark in the amount of work he accomplished.

In 1893, Francis P. Harper, publisher, of New York City, brought out in superb style, under the very able editorship of Dr. Elliott Coues, "The History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition." While Dr. Coues has won world-wide fame as a naturalist, ornithologist, lexicographer, and scientific writer, he has rendered no greater service to his countrymen than that of placing before them this carefully edited work. By securing the original, unpublished journals of Lewis and Clark, he was able to add largely to the best edition that had previously appeared. He was himself an explorer and had spent much time in all the regions traversed by the expedition. His notes and annotations throughout the work, upon the natural history and topography, are of very great value, making it so complete that no other edition is ever likely to be called for. He has said the final word relative to Lewis and Clark. Some

‡Other details with contemporary history may be found in the LIFE OF FATHER TURNER (named above), by the writer of this paper.

months ago Dr. Coues completed his editorial work, in like manner full and exhaustive, upon a new edition to be published the present autumn, by Mr. Harper, of the Expeditions of Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike. To this perilous and responsible duty Pike was assigned by General James Wilkinson, Commander-in-chief of the Army, on the 5th day of August, 1805, not long after Lewis and Clark started on their long journey to the Pacific Ocean. He was first directed to explore the Mississippi river from St. Louis to its sources, select sites for military posts, hold councils with the Indians, bring about peace between the Sioux and Chippewas, and look after United States interests in the fur trade, and in general to collect such information as he could concerning our new possessions. At that time Julien Dubuque was already established at his lead mines in Iowa; but there was scarcely a permanent American location beyond this point, and Prairie du Chien was the uttermost settlement, excepting, of course, the English trading-posts. Pike's first exploit of consequence was to secure from the Sioux the cession of land near the mouth of the Minnesota river, where was built Fort Snelling, and later, Minneapolis. Pike says, in a letter to Wilkinson, still extant, that he got this ground "for a song." Dr. Coues has found the original document, in Pike's hand writing, with the signs manual of ten Sioux chiefs, which shows that in fact Pike got it for nothing, the place of the price to be paid being left blank. This was filled in by Congress with the sum of \$2,000, or about two cents an acre. Pike proceeded to the rapids now known by his name, a little below the present site of Little Falls, Minnesota, and there erected a stockade on the right bank of the Mississippi, an eighth of a mile below the mouth of a stream he called Pine Creek, now known as Swan River. Housing a part of his command here, he proceeded to Lower Red Cedar and Sandy Lakes, at each of which there was an English trading post, and thence continued on his arduous sledge journey in the depth of winter to Leech Lake and Cass Lake, the latter then known as Upper Red Cedar Lake. This was the limit of his journey. He accepted the tradition of his day, that Leech

Lake was the "source of the Mississippi," and though his map shows continuous water beyond Cass Lake, this was in the direction of Turtle Lake, and there is no hint in his text, or trace on his map of the Itasca source, which had been first visited by William Morrison in 1804. Pike returned without special incident and reached St. Louis April 6, 1806, having been gone eight months and twenty-two days.

The able manner in which Pike had carried our flag in this quarter led to his immediate selection by General Wilkinson for a still more important and not less arduous enterprise. Our relations with Spain were at the time strained to the point of rupture. A gallant Spanish officer had made a spirited raid into our Louisiana, as far as the Pawnee village on the Republican Fork, by the Kansas River, and some counter demonstration was in order. Pike was sent ostensibly to treat with the Osages, Pawnees and Comanches, and discover the sources of the Arkansaw and Red River; his private instructions were of a diplomatic character, and have never been divulged. Wilkinson was later openly accused of relations with the Aaron Burr conspiracy; but Pike need not be supposed to have been anything else than a soldier under orders to explore certain parts of our new Territory, with military force enough to hold his own on the confines of the Spanish possessions. He left St. Louis, July 15, 1806; ascended the Missouri to the great Osage, and went up the latter to the Osage villages. Finishing his negotiations with these Indians, he cut clear across Kansas, overland, through the valley of the Neosho, passed the head of Vermilion (Verdigris) River, and struck the Smoky Hill River, a little above Salina; whence, crossing the Salina and Solomon Rivers, he arrived at the Pawnee village, on the Republican, nearly on the present boundary between Kansas and Nebraska. The Spaniards had just been there, and Pike found the Pawnees disaffected to the verge of actual hostility, but he patched up some sort of an understanding with them, and was glad to get away on his further exploration. He struck nearly due south, on the hot trail of the Spaniards, and reached the Arkansaw at the place.

where is now the city of Great Bend. There he detached his lieutenant, Wilkinson (son of the General), to descend the Arkansas with a few of the men, and started up the river with the rest. On the 15th of November, 1806, he first caught sight of the Rockies, and "gave three cheers to the Mexican Mountains." In a few days he was at the present site of Pueblo, Colorado, where he threw up a slight breast work, and started on a side trip toward the celebrated peak, which now bears his name. Two of the myths of history are, that Pike discovered Pike's Peak, and ascended it. He did neither of these. He was never nearer than some 15 or 20 miles of Pike's Peak; and this was already the most celebrated mountain top in "Louisiana," in Spanish annals—a sort of *Ultima Thule* to the Mexicans. The peak was first ascended by Dr. Edwin James, of Major Long's party, some years later, and so named James' Peak. Returning to his camp at Pueblo, from this excursion, Pike continued up the Arkansas to the present site of Canon City, in the throat of the Royal Gorge, or Grand Canon of the Arkansas. From this point his movements have always been regarded as problematical; but Dr. Coues has traced his exact route, mile by mile. Pike went up Oil Creek into South Park, Colorado, there discovering head waters of the South Platte River, (though not the actual sources of that river); he traversed the Park westerly and then southerly, and left it by the Pass, since called Trout Creek Pass. Here of course he stumbled on the Arkansas river again; he thought it was the Red river and went up it to within probably 12 or 15 miles of the present site of Leadville. Having found, as he supposed, the sources of Red River in these mountains, he turned to descend this river; he had a hard time of it, and his surprise may be imagined when he fetched up at his own former camp at Canon City! He built a stockade here, in which he left two or three of his men, and then pushed on to discover the Red River. It was the depth of winter; his men were half-clothed, and half-starved; their sufferings were fearful; it is almost incredible, that a man lived to tell the tale of the misery they endured. For, with more zeal than discre-

tion, Pike plunged southward through those fearful mountains, up the South or Pike's fork of the Arkansaw, now called Grape Creek. This fetched him through the Wet Mountain Valley, in the face of the great Sangre de Cristo range. He managed to drag a part of his command through the Sand Hill Pass of these mountains, leaving others strung along his disastrous route with frozen feet, and entered the San Luis valley, through which the uppermost Rio Grande flows. Here he thought surely he was on the long sought Red River; he went down it to the Rio Conejos, and built a stockade on the latter, four or five miles above its mouth.

Here he was surprised and in fact captured by a party of Spanish soldiers. The authorities had been fully informed of his movements from the start, through disaffected parties in St. Louis, and could catch him at their own convenience. Having been thus taken on the Rio Grande, he was actually captured in what certainly seemed to be an invasion of Spanish territory; and he was ordered forthwith to accompany his captors to Mexico, under the diplomatic guise of a polite invitation to visit the Governor of Chihuahua, who had heard with pain that he had lost his way, and was anxious to show it to him. Pike saw he had been trapped, but accepted the situation with the best grace he could, and forthwith started with most of his command under the escort of the Spanish dragoons, February 26, 1807.

Thus began his third exploration—an involuntary one, which he styles a "tour through New Spain." He was ostensibly the guest of the authorities: he was actually a prisoner, if not of war, then of trespass, who had been arrested and brought to book as a suspicious character, who must be made to give an account of himself. He was brought before the authorities at Santa Fe, and subsequently at Chihuahua. He was deprived of all his papers; but otherwise was treated with forbearance, and in fact, with distinguished consideration. Under the escort provided for the purpose he was conducted from Chihuahua around the southern end of the Bolson de Mapimi, and northwest again to the Rio Grande, at the point

known as the Presidio del Norte. All of our Texas was then Spanish country; he was escorted through this, by way of San Antonio, along the old Spanish trail, to the town of Natchitoches, then our frontier post in that quarter, where he was once more a free American citizen, under the protection of the flag he loved so well.

Pike had been given up for lost by his friends, and was received back with acclamations only less resounding than those which had greeted Lewis and Clark the year before. The political aspect of affairs rendered everything relating to New Spain a matter of the utmost interest. Public curiosity was excited by the rumors of this El Dorado which the jealous temper of Spain sedulously strove to conceal. The history of his tour in that region was eagerly awaited. A friend had already (in 1807) published for Pike a short account of his Mississippi exploration, which had been well received, and Pike immediately set about the work which immortalized his name. This appeared as a short octavo volume in 1810, was soon reprinted as a quarto in London, and also republished in a French translation.

Pike was rapidly promoted to be colonel and brigadier-general, and with the latter rank he led the forces which made the assault on York (old Fort Toronto), April 27, 1813. Here he fell mortally wounded by the explosion of a magazine, and closed his gallant career a few hours afterward.

THE DES MOINES RIVER LAND GRANT.

BY COL. C. H. GATCH.

[THIRD PAPER.]

As to who were the intended beneficiaries of the joint resolution, and whether or not it was intended to exclude the Navigation Company and its grantees so far as such intention can

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.